Connecting Research to Teaching in the English Language Classroom

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Teaching English worldwide has proved to be more challenging with the development of technical and advanced science disciplines. Science and technical fields have made strides in introducing new curricula to supply the marketplace with employees and researchers by employing partnerships and modernized courses while some researchers argue that English language curricula maintain the same content and pedagogic practices (Colarusso, 2010; West and William, 2015). Although many English language practitioners have incorporated some cultural topics, they still face resistance from both students and colleagues. Therefore, English language teachers strive to re-examine their curriculum and educational outcomes in order to cope with the vibrant academic as well as global culture, especially in Higher Education sectors. While some English departments and centres have approached changing course materials and sometimes the curriculum itself, more research can help English teachers consider engaging students in designing and developing the curriculum. Many teachers complain about the lack of student engagement and motivation, especially in the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC, henceforth) region, and hence this paper aims to encourage more active engagement with Higher Education students in interdisciplinary research. This paper critiques research-based education as discussed by contemporary pedagogic scholars and explores possibilities of engaging students in research and designing the curriculum as part of their higher education process. The paper focusses on research that solves real-world problems as indicated in 21 Century Skills. This research suggests that English teachers can implement constructive education through two research approaches. The first is research to develop the English language curriculum while the second is to involve students in an interdisciplinary research that employs English as a language as well as a knowledge vessel in their field.

Glossary: research-based education, English language classroom, student engagement, interdisciplinary research
1. Introduction

This paper aims at introducing research-based education to first-year students in the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (GCC, henceforth) region. It is directed to the English language educators who strive to cope with rapid changes in technology and science, and to cope with the emerging demands of the market-place. Knott (2017) argues that many English language educators have lost passion towards their field and classes due to different global changes. He says that some teachers “believe that there is simply no way to connect with their students” (p.629). This reflects the distance between students and teachers, which is a result of many factors such as generation gap and modern technology. Other teachers feel “jaded with various grievances both real and exaggerated” (ibid). Knott refers to a popular phase that many teachers face after teaching for a considerable amount of time. However, pedagogy is an art, and it is our role as teachers to keep it alive through innovation and creativity. This paper proposes the concept of research-based education where research is introduced to first-year student curriculum as proposed by Tong et. al (2018).

Healey and Jenkins (2015) argue that research-based teaching is a pedagogical model where the emphasis is placed on students’ active participation in academic research and scholarship. Tong et. al (2018) state that UCL has furthered this approach from research-based teaching to research-based education. This approach involves an active partnership between the educator and the student in order to collaborately reform and construct courses’ curricula. Such an approach opts to innovate English language pedagogy with a non-conformist style of curriculum design, where students are involved in academic research as well as courses’ design and development. As educators, our ambitions and objectives are to develop students and raise their self-esteem to prepare them to the marketplace after they graduate.

2. Theoretical Framework

Teaching English language in Higher Education has often involved student engagement and interaction in the classroom. It stimulates students to question their local culture, spoken language(s), and their lifestyle. Knott (2017) argues that “the dissemination of English has inevitable effects on learners potentially altering their worldview, affecting their identity and their sense of self” (p.631). This indicates that the impact of English language classes on students is remarkable in shaping their character. Such discussions have inspired English language educators to integrate different components in the English classroom, such as comparative linguistics and cultural contexts. Such integration has significantly contributed to anthropological and literary studies. Yet, most English language courses in the GCC region depend on classical assessment and evaluation curriculum, where students go through many tests and exams (Abou-El-Kheir & MacLeod, 2017; Knott, 2017). On the other hand, some Higher Education sectors integrate technical writing, which is usually taught as one of the English language courses. It is in particular practised in the fields of business and engineering where technical writing has proved to be effective in implementing language skills in real world problems. However, this integration is limited to senior undergraduate students; hence, the integration among fields does not develop significantly (Tong et. al, 2018). Alternatively, introducing integrated research can be done during the first year of university or college. In addition, students do not have the chance to develop their skills in integrated research and public engagement. Moore (2012, p.99) has discussed that
some curricula are not necessarily designed to serve the interests and local pedagogical demands of the students, which has created what he calls “transformative intellectuals.” Thus, most students become a means of cultural transformation when learning English as a second language. For instance, many students and even English teachers adopt foreign cultural practices such as a different dress code, and attitudes. This reflects colonial and post-colonial impact of English as it is a result of contact between western and other cultures. (Kumaravadivelu, 2006, p.12)

Engaging students in the classroom is one of the most common challenges in modern education and pedagogy (Sinatra et. al, 2015). Some teachers follow the classical way of questions and answers, where the answers do not require critical thinking. Other teachers demonstrate much effort to be creative and distinctive in constructing a dynamic class where students build their characters in addition to constructing knowledge. Richards (2013) argues that many teachers strive to facilitate their classes and courses to be more student-active. He discusses that such teachers maintain that the students are the centre of the teaching process and hence more student engagement needs to be developed. One area where student engagement can be nurtured is involving students in research. Research-based education leads to more engagement of the students because it involves at least two participants, the student and the educator. This results in a reciprocal relationship between the student and the teacher. It also opens the door for more experimentation in shaping this relationship, hence generating more analysis of the learning outcomes. Healey et. al (2015, p.141-163) argue that such an approach provides an opportunity to construct an “egalitarian learning community,” where students and staff are co-inquirers in learning, teaching, and research. Thus, research-based education is not only a means to consolidate the relationship between the English teacher and the student, but it can also be customized to serve both the teacher and the student. It encourages the English teacher to become more involved in updated research, and hence contribute to developing the whole educational process.

The University College of London (UCL) has experimented research-based education, and hence Tong et. al (2018, p.6) present the results of this experiment as an example of constructive partnership between students and educators in academic research and scholarship. Tong (2018) states that their book is a result of different activities that “were designed to help the student teams prepare, write and edit their chapters on connecting research and education through learning.” This indicates that involving students in scholarly academic research is possible as long as there are defined roles for all research participants. The assigned project, entitled “Shaping Higher Education with Students: Ways to Connect Research and Teaching,” proposes an initiative where teaching is equal to research. In order to achieve this project, Tong says that the students authors and editorial participants have closely coordinated with the project’s core team which consists of academic scholars and teachers. The whole project is divided into six stages that has included academic workshops and discussions, peer reviews, research and reading groups, and subsequent editorial processes. In all stages, graduate and undergraduate students coordinate with academic faculty members in order to achieve the target of the respective stages. For instance, stage one involves 15 students and 12 academic faculty members who come from different departments. Thus, Tong (2018, p.10) contends that this project explores the staff-student relationship which “has underpinned this book project at multiple levels. The three sections of the book showcase
three distinct types of student–staff partnership for advancing the scholarship of teaching and learning in a consortium setting.” This suggests that the project has successfully presented more analyses and understanding of the student-staff relationship. In addition, it advocates research-based education as a means of successful revolutionary mode of modern education since it can accommodate different disciplines, scholars, and students.

Research-based education that depends on integrating different disciplines can have a significant impact on students if it is implemented from year one at college and university levels. Fung (2017) argues that the whole curriculum can be research-based, and its main focus is developing the students’ analytical and critical skills. This involves team work as well as independent study to develop the students’ learning skills and abilities. Therefore, he suggests that students’ activities “may include not only undertaking investigations and formulating related critical arguments and findings, but also peer review, dissemination of knowledge and public engagement. Such approaches can apply at all levels of study, from the first undergraduate year” (Fung, 2017, p.20). Fung implies that students can undertake such advanced levels of research since the early stages of their Higher Education experience. He also suggests a transmission from the class research that is designed to achieve grades to public research that involves solving real world problems. Tong et al (2018) maintain that developing Higher Education students research skills is a means to involve students in curriculum development and design. They argue that students have indirectly inspired their educators in curriculum and course development with their daily feedback on the course materials and assessment methods. Thus, they reflect that “writing scholarly materials on teaching for academics from the student perspective would be a radical but compelling way to inspire pedagogical innovations – by challenging the very core of the conventional roles taken by students and teachers” (p.2). Tong et al (2018) indicate that engaging students in curriculum design is one way to modernize pedagogy since it defies the conventional role of the educator as the master of the course. He also argues that this is but a beginning step to inspire pedagogical practices, where education becomes a democratic partnership between the student and the educator.

Teaching English in Higher Education can implement approaches that create a constructive partnership between students and their own curricula. Barnett and Coate (2005) have investigated the importance of engaging students in constructing their own course. We need to involve our students in such processes to boost students’ self-esteem as well as involve their active participation in real world issues. Tong et al (2018) argue that we can “empower our students, allowing them to develop and present their ideas about research-based education in the form of scholarly writing with confidence” (p.5). This suggests that research-based education can have an extremely positive impact on students. Cook-Sather et al. (2014) and Bryson, (2016) argue that the partnership between students and educators has promoted research-based education to develop the active participation of students beyond academic research. Both Bryson (2016) and Cook-Sather et. al (2014) argue that the student-educator partnership is built on a set of powerful values such as reciprocity, challenge, and trust. These values are bases to initiate an active involvement of students in constructing their own curricula.
3. Research Questions:

Higher Education sectors have dramatically evolved their academic structures, materials, and environments to cope with the 21st Century Learning Skills in the GCC region. Most technical colleges such as Engineering, IT and Business have partially developed their curriculum to involve more research-based education and market-place engagement. Since some English language courses are sometimes criticized for being static in content, this paper explores the potential transmission from the traditional courses to the research-based courses. The current paper addresses two main questions:

- How can we involve Higher Education students in curriculum development and design in the English language classroom?
- How can we bridge the gap between English language courses and the student’s major field in Higher Education?

4. Methodology & Research Limitations

This is a research-based paper which attempts to implement the research-based pedagogical practices as suggested by Tong et. al (2018) as a model to be adopted in the GCC region. The paper is descriptive in nature and relies on critiquing the implementation of research-based education represented by interdisciplinary research and educator-student partnership in research to construct curricula. The paper also reviews research papers and academic arguments which have debated the student-educator partnership in light of the global changes of the 21st century. The conclusion of this paper is based on the analysis of our findings.

Although research-based curriculum is one of the trending issues in pedagogy, it has some limitations in the GCC area. Most English language courses are standardized and unified in content, assessment, and course material to comply with quality assurance procedures and requirements. This results in restrictions of implementing new approaches and curriculum innovations, especially with the strict centralized procedures and regulations that do not show flexibility towards course content and assessment. In addition, the increasing number of students does not encourage English language educators to choose research-based curricula. This growth in numbers is part of a global challenge. For instance, the number of students has increased to 68% between 2004 and 2014 in the UK (OECD, 2014). Moreover, some students in the GCC region are not used to research-based courses, and hence they might express some discomfort and resistance towards such a pedagogical approach.

5. Analysis and Findings

5.1 Educators and Research

Research has a significant role in our academic careers, and it often has a substantial weight in our annual evaluations and appraisals. Unfortunately, due to the large classes and overloaded schedules, most educators strive to find some time for research. West and Williams (2015) report that very few ELT educators participate or
even read research-oriented journals, such as Research in the Teaching of English RTE (p.17-24). Both scholars present the results of examining the topics that are often presented in research-oriented journals, where writing pedagogy and new literacy are some of the most common topics. West and Williams (2015) maintain that some research papers of English language teachers have explored how “new literacies, social interaction, and composition in digital spaces effects literacy teaching and learning” (p.17). This suggests that English educators are aware of modern pedagogical challenges, and they are trying to reform and develop their English language curricula accordingly. Colarusso (2010, p. 432-58) argues that some teachers have resorted to collaborative inquiry and applied research as means to reform their curricula. She argues that “rather than disparate and disconnected teacher rationales and efforts creating a curriculum change vacuum that then tends to be filled externally, integral, deep structure reform is made possible through collaborative processes of dialogic learning, research, and consensus.” (ibid, p.453) This indicates that collaborative research has a substantial potential to reform English language curricula.

Although collaborative research can be in parallel with the research-based pedagogy, it might receive much resistance from the educators themselves. First of all, teaching for long years leads to taming the motivation and enthusiasm of teachers according to Knott (2017), especially if the curriculum does not go through remarkable changes. In addition, some English language teachers are not affiliated with research at all according to West and Williams (2015). Other teachers are overloaded with many classes and huge numbers of students, as part of a global phenomenon of the huge increase in Higher Education students numbers. Thus, Colarusso (2010) argues that one of the significant challenges of implementing research-based education is “the ample time to develop a shared vision or consensus for change” (p.454). Colarusso (2010) suggests that such approaches demand the “will” to change by educators and practitioners. In short, research-based pedagogy is one of the common challenges to implement in the English language curricula. However, it is one of the provocative means that can lead to innovating the traditional English language classes and curricula, and it has the potential to more collaborative research with other disciplines in the world of pedagogy.

5.2 Research and Curriculum Development

Student engagement is one of the hottest topics in the debates and discussions of Higher Education. Axelson and Flick (2011) argue that “few terms in the lexicon of higher education today are invoked more frequently, and in more varied ways, than engagement”(p.38-43). This has led scholars and educators to explore new methods of more student engagement in pedagogy. Colarusso (2010) argues that “with global education and global teaching, the Activism model presents a compelling and challenging provocation to English teachers” (p.455). She explains that the Activism model means the active engagement of the student with the course and the teacher where they both influence each other. She argues that such a modern approach leads to creating “leaders capable of inspiring many others (teachers, students, the wider community)” (ibid). This indicates that more active engagement of students can develop leadership skills in both educators and students.
Research-based education involves students engagement, and hence it is important to define the meaning of student engagement. In simple words, student engagement means to actively involve students inside the classroom. However, Ashwin and McVitty (2015, p.343-359) argue that student engagement is a very broad term that is difficult to define. Therefore, they argue that the purpose or what is to be “formed” out of this engagement is the key to define student engagement. Consequently, they identify three main purposes of student engagement as shown in figure 1. The first involves engagement to form individual understanding and a second purpose is to construct their own communities. The third purpose, the main discussion in this paper, is to form curricula, which leads students to contribute in forming and designing their courses in Higher Education. The three purposes of student engagement lead to a distinctive reciprocal relationship between the student and the educator because the engagement of students in such contexts requires feedback from both the teacher and the student. This will result in mutual exchange of ideas, cultures, and theoretical framework, and hence the student-educator partnership becomes more of equity rather than the traditional hierarchy (where the teacher is often superior to the student).

![Nested hierarchy of the object of student engagement in Ashwin and McVitty (2015)](image)

Implementing research-based education is pretty recent and hence it might face some drawbacks. One of these drawbacks is lack of theoretical framework and literature in this field, especially research that involves research-based education from the perspective of students. Sotiriou (2018) argues that despite the numerous discussions of the student-educator partnership, “research on students’ perceptions of such partnerships is quite rare” (p.53). In addition, such partnerships require some structure that is constructed by the exchange of ideas between students and teachers, but these ideas require consensus from all involved partners. Therefore, there are significant criteria that determine the success of the student-educator partnership. Bryson (2016, p.14-15) argue that these
include reciprocity, challenge, empowerment, and authenticity. Another challenge is the traditional teachers who still cling to the past experiments and theories of pedagogy. In fact, many teachers still refer to Dewey’s concept of education, where teachers depend on “the study of past operations and results that have been successful; through acquaintance with current methods and tools, and careful scrutinizing of one’s own attempts to see what succeeds and fails” (Hendley, 2010, p.7). Such discussions have led teachers to depend more on past experiments with less focus on the current challenges of students as well as constant change of global culture. This has also resulted in substantial mimesis and repetition in the delivery and design of the classroom despite incorporating current digital trends of pedagogical software applications. Other teachers do not include students as active participants or partners in discussing curriculum design or development. They believe more in collaboration of the teachers themselves. Wood (2007) argues that collaborative teachers “engage in collective inquiry in order to weight their practices of innovation against evidence and critical dialogue” (p.282). This indicates that collaboration of teachers has constructive results in curricula design, but it does not involve students at all. In short, research-based education that constructs curricula is highly challenging. If the criteria of Bryson (2016) are structured as the conditions of student-educator partnerships to implement a research-based curriculum, such relationships have more chances to succeed with tangible results.

Research-based curricula have many advantages since they construct a reciprocal student-educator partnership. The HEA (2016) has promoted student-educator partnerships as one of the successful methods to increase student engagement and improve teaching as part of the 21st Century Learning skills. This is due to the huge impact on bridging the gap between the student and the real world, especially when it comes to the marketplace. Similarly, Killen and Chatterton (2015) argue that student-educator partnerships potentially lead to many positive results. For instance, they inspire the educators to conduct research that shapes change. Killen and Chatterton (2015) also argue that such partnerships increase networking with the professional community for both students and educators. They contribute to enhanced networking with the wider professional community, which leads to improving employability potentials. Thus, research-based curricula are powerful because they have the ability to train and sometimes introduce students to the career real-world problems and decision making.

5.3 Interdisciplinary Research

Interdisciplinary research has become a trend with the dawn of the twenty first century. Many universities have established interdisciplinary majors and centres, which has led to establishing international interdisciplinary networks such as the International Geosphere-Biosphere Programme (IGBP) and the International Human Dimensions Programme (IHDP). Hackett and Rhoten (2009) argue that although it has received much criticism, interdisciplinary research has become a source of prolific knowledge production in addition to restructuring knowledge production. By definition, an interdisciplinary research involves merging more than one discipline. Aboelela (2007) defines interdisciplinary research as any study or group of studies undertaken by scholars from two or more distinct academic fields, based on a conceptual model that links or integrates
theoretical frameworks from those disciplines, using study design and methodology that is not limited to any one field, and requiring the use of perspectives and skills of the involved disciplines in all phases from study design through data collection, data analysis, specifying conclusions and preparing manuscripts and other reports of work completed (p.329).

This suggests that interdisciplinary researchers do not only require but also acquire knowledge from various disciplines. Consequently, interdisciplinary research does not only lead to more integrative outcomes but more complicated frameworks. Therefore, Cantwell and Brannen (2011) argue that interdisciplinary research develops integrative theories much more powerful than the single discipline. Interdisciplinary research has become a global trend in scholarly discussions, especially in English language pedagogy where it has become a means to boost students’ engagement in the classroom and reform the English language as an academic discipline.

Interdisciplinary research can play a significant role in reforming English curricula in pedagogy and English as a discipline. English has become one of the means that connects the world since it solves the language issue as a barrier that hinders academic collaboration. Aboelela et. al (2007) argue that the language barrier is one of the most common challenges that face interdisciplinary and collaborative research. This is due to the ambiguities of translated terminologies on the epistemological and ontological levels. Therefore, English can serve as a standard medium that overcomes the language problem. In the GCC region, many English language teachers teach business and science students technical writing courses. Such courses offer the English language teacher the opportunity to conduct interdisciplinary research with the students. Therefore, the English language teachers can facilitate classes with more research-based orientation to engage both students and educators in interdisciplinary research production. From another perspective, Aitken & Semeniuk (1997) and Eagleton (1983) have predicted the challenges that threaten English as an academic discipline due to the different global factors, such as the development of business and technology disciplines to meet the demands of the marketplace. Other scholars have predicted that English as a discipline is to become more engaged with culture studies and anthropology, such as Eagleton who predicted that English is to be transferred to the courses of anthropology and culture. Such predictions could be exaggerated, but they still imply the interdisciplinary potentials of English. Hence, facilitating the English language courses to become more involved in interdisciplinary research can innovate the discipline and introduce a creative discipline that can cope with the 21st century challenges and updates.

In order to encourage interdisciplinary research, academic organizations and structures have presented some approaches. Turner et al. (2015) argue that some universities have established customized centres to introduce interdisciplinary studies and research. Turner et al. (2015) argue that “establishing interdisciplinary institutional structures, especially creating research centres, is a common strategy for addressing institutional conflicts between interdisciplinary activities and department structures” (p.654). This suggests that establishing centres encourages interdisciplinary courses by bridging the gap and blurring conflicts between the different academic disciplines. Another suggestion to encourage interdisciplinary research is to establish research teams
and reading groups from different academic disciplines and cultural backgrounds. However, Turner et al. (2015) argue that when a team stays together for a considerable period of time, their ideas are destined to consensus in order to formulate an agreed project. When these groups work together, they might tend to gradually formulate the same perspectives and discussions due to their cooperative interactions. Therefore, they might risk converting to the traditional methods of knowledge construction which do not involve interdisciplinary theoretical framework and epistemology.

English teachers of the GCC region have the potential to lead interdisciplinary research in their own classes if they implement a research-based curriculum. English language courses target all disciplines in both undergraduate and postgraduate education. The offered courses include technical writing, academic writing, project writing, and research methods and theories. Such courses provide an exceptional opportunity to experiment innovating English by involving interdisciplinary research. There are plenty of case studies that can be analysed as examples of integrating two or more disciplines in one research in the GCC. The next step is to develop this further by involving student groups to innovate interdisciplinary research at the undergraduate level.

6. Conclusion

Research-based education is an innovative and creative method that can reform English curricula as well as English as a discipline. Some teachers resist such an approach for different reasons, such as huge numbers of both classes and students as well as course commitment requirements, pacing schedules. In addition, students of the GCC who are used to classical methods of assessment and pedagogy might not feel comfortable and even confident to be part of such courses. From another perspective, research-based education is costly to some universities which suffer from exhaustive ratios of teachers to students. This type of courses requires more student-educator contact, and it demands staff members who excel in commitment to achieve academic targets that are both creative and challenging.

Although it is very challenging to implement, research-based education has invaluable benefits to both teachers and students. It can lead to more experimentation in interdisciplinary research, and hence boost knowledge production creatively. Consequently, universities, students, and teachers will not only develop their research skills, but also will become more engaged and abreast with international professional networks and the local marketplace. This in turn consolidates the relationships between the students and the marketplace on the one hand, and between the universities and their own marketplace on the other. In addition, research-based education has the potential to engage students in designing their own course curricula. Students comments and perspectives regarding a certain curriculum is invaluable because it provides us as educators with various perspectives outside our pedagogical theoretical frameworks that we strive to abide to. It also encourages both teachers and students to become more creative in designing curricula and developing teaching methods. In this paper, we have investigated how research-based education can innovate English curricula and English as a discipline. This research can be more solidified with more experiments, empirical case studies the future.
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